SŪRAH 50

Qāf

Prologue

The Prophet used to read this *sūrah* when he delivered a sermon on ʿĪd occasions and before Friday prayers, making it the theme and the content of his speech for large audiences. It is certainly a momentous *sūrah*, outlining fundamental facts, using a strong rhythm, powerful expressions, clearly-delineated images, highlighted connotations and emphatic verse endings. It addresses our hearts and minds from all angles putting before us the truth that we are always under God's watchful eye, from birth to death, and then to the time of resurrection, gathering and reckoning. This is an ever-present watch of man at all times, losing nothing and overlooking nothing. Every breath, fleeting thought and feeling is known; every uttered word is recorded; every move is monitored. This complete watch accounts for thoughts and actions alike; nothing escapes it, and nothing is hidden from it. It monitors secret whispers in the same way as it records what is done in broad daylight.

All these are well-known facts. However, the *sūrah* outlines them here in a way that shows them to be totally new, with surprising effects that combine apprehension with wonder. It shakes us powerfully alerting us to a momentous event, about which we have thus far been oblivious. It uses images of life, death, decay and subsequent resurrection. It touches

on our expectations of life after death. It refers to a host of universal truths in the heavens and earth, water and plants, fruits ripening individually and in clusters. It all "*serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8)

It is very difficult to give a summary of this *sūrah*, as also list its main points, or outline the ideas discussed and the images portrayed in any manner of speech other than their original Qur'ānic style and expression. Therefore, we will proceed straightaway to our discussion of the *sūrah*, praying for God's help.

Qāf

سُورَةُ ق

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Qāf. By the glorious Qur'ān. (1)

قٓ ۚ وَٱلْقُرْءَانِ ٱلْمَجِيدِ ﴿١﴾

But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! (2)

بَلْ عَجِبُوٓا۟ أَن جَآءَهُم مُّنذِرٌ مِّنْهُمْ فَقَالَ ٱلْكَٰفِرُونَ هَٰذَا شَىْءٌ عَجِيبٌ ﴿٢﴾

When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.' (3)

أَءِذَا مِتْنَا وَكُنَّا تُرَابًا ۖ ذَٰلِكَ رَجْعٌۢ بَعِيدٌ ﴿٣﴾

We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record. (4)

قَدْ عَلِمْنَا مَا تَنقُصُ ٱلْأَرْضُ مِنْهُمْ ۖ وَعِندَنَا كِتَٰبٌ حَفِيظٌۢ ﴿٤﴾

Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion. (5)

بَلْ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِٱلْحَقِّ لَمَّا جَآءَهُمْ فَهُمْ فِىٓ أَمْرٍ مَّرِيجٍ ﴿٥﴾

Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it. (6)

أَفَلَمْ يَنظُرُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَوْقَهُمْ كَيْفَ بَنَيْنَٰهَا وَزَيَّنَّٰهَا وَمَا لَهَا مِن فُرُوجٍ ﴿٦﴾

وَٱلْأَرْضَ مَدَدْنَٰهَا وَأَلْقَيْنَا فِيهَا رَوَٰسِىَ
وَأَنۢبَتْنَا فِيهَا مِن كُلِّ زَوْجٍۭ بَهِيجٍ ﴿٧﴾

We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it, (7)

تَبْصِرَةً وَذِكْرَىٰ لِكُلِّ عَبْدٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٨﴾

so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God. (8)

وَنَزَّلْنَا مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ مَآءً مُّبَٰرَكًا فَأَنۢبَتْنَا
بِهِۦ جَنَّٰتٍ وَحَبَّ ٱلْحَصِيدِ ﴿٩﴾

We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, (9)

وَٱلنَّخْلَ بَاسِقَٰتٍ لَّهَا طَلْعٌ نَّضِيدٌ ﴿١٠﴾

and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, (10)

رِّزْقًا لِّلْعِبَادِ ۖ وَأَحْيَيْنَا بِهِۦ بَلْدَةً مَّيْتًا ۚ
كَذَٰلِكَ ٱلْخُرُوجُ ﴿١١﴾

providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead. (11)

كَذَّبَتْ قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمُ نُوحٍ وَأَصْحَٰبُ
ٱلرَّسِّ وَثَمُودُ ﴿١٢﴾

Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, (12)

وَعَادٌ وَفِرْعَوْنُ وَإِخْوَٰنُ لُوطٍ ﴿١٣﴾

'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, (13)

وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْأَيْكَةِ وَقَوْمُ تُبَّعٍ ۚ كُلٌّ كَذَّبَ
ٱلرُّسُلَ فَحَقَّ وَعِيدِ ﴿١٤﴾

the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. (14)

أَفَعَيِينَا بِٱلْخَلْقِ ٱلْأَوَّلِ ۚ بَلْ هُمْ فِى
لَبْسٍ مِّنْ خَلْقٍ جَدِيدٍ ﴿١٥﴾

Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation. (15)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ وَنَعْلَمُ مَا تُوَسْوِسُ بِهِۦ
نَفْسُهُۥ ۖ وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ ٱلْوَرِيدِ ﴿١٦﴾

It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; (16)

إِذْ يَتَلَقَّى ٱلْمُتَلَقِّيَانِ عَنِ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ ٱلشِّمَالِ
قَعِيدٌ ﴿١٧﴾

with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, (17)

مَّا يَلْفِظُ مِن قَوْلٍ إِلَّا لَدَيْهِ رَقِيبٌ عَتِيدٌ ﴿١٨﴾

every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher. (18)

وَجَآءَتْ سَكْرَةُ ٱلْمَوْتِ بِٱلْحَقِّ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ
مَا كُنتَ مِنْهُ تَحِيدُ ﴿١٩﴾

The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: 'This is what you tried to escape.' (19)

وَنُفِخَ فِى ٱلصُّورِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ ٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٠﴾

The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' (20)

وَجَآءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَّعَهَا سَآئِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ ﴿٢١﴾

Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. (21)

لَّقَدْ كُنتَ فِى غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَٰذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنكَ
غِطَآءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ ٱلْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ ﴿٢٢﴾

'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' (22)

وَقَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ هَٰذَا مَا لَدَيَّ عَتِيدٌ ﴿٢٣﴾

And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' (23)

أَلْقِيَا فِي جَهَنَّمَ كُلَّ كَفَّارٍ عَنِيدٍ ﴿٢٤﴾

'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, (24)

مَّنَّاعٍ لِّلْخَيْرِ مُعْتَدٍ مُّرِيبٍ ﴿٢٥﴾

everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, (25)

ٱلَّذِي جَعَلَ مَعَ ٱللَّهِ إِلَٰهًا ءَاخَرَ فَأَلْقِيَاهُ فِي ٱلْعَذَابِ ٱلشَّدِيدِ ﴿٢٦﴾

who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' (26)

قَالَ قَرِينُهُۥ رَبَّنَا مَآ أَطْغَيْتُهُۥ وَلَٰكِن كَانَ فِي ضَلَٰلٍۭ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٢٧﴾

His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' (27)

قَالَ لَا تَخْتَصِمُوا۟ لَدَيَّ وَقَدْ قَدَّمْتُ إِلَيْكُم بِٱلْوَعِيدِ ﴿٢٨﴾

God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. (28)

مَا يُبَدَّلُ ٱلْقَوْلُ لَدَيَّ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ بِظَلَّٰمٍ لِّلْعَبِيدِ ﴿٢٩﴾

My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.' (29)

يَوْمَ نَقُولُ لِجَهَنَّمَ هَلِ ٱمْتَلَأْتِ وَتَقُولُ هَلْ مِن مَّزِيدٍ ﴿٣٠﴾

On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?' (30)

وَأُزْلِفَتِ ٱلْجَنَّةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ ﴿٣١﴾

And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: (31)

هَٰذَا مَا تُوعَدُونَ لِكُلِّ أَوَّابٍ حَفِيظٍ ﴿٣٢﴾

'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, (32)

مَّنْ خَشِيَ الرَّحْمَٰنَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَجَاءَ بِقَلْبٍ مُّنِيبٍ ﴿٣٣﴾

who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. (33)

ادْخُلُوهَا بِسَلَامٍ ۖ ذَٰلِكَ يَوْمُ الْخُلُودِ ﴿٣٤﴾

Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' (34)

لَهُم مَّا يَشَاءُونَ فِيهَا وَلَدَيْنَا مَزِيدٌ ﴿٣٥﴾

There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them. (35)

وَكَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا قَبْلَهُم مِّن قَرْنٍ هُمْ أَشَدُّ مِنْهُم بَطْشًا فَنَقَّبُوا فِي الْبِلَادِ هَلْ مِن مَّحِيصٍ ﴿٣٦﴾

How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. (36)

إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكْرَىٰ لِمَن كَانَ لَهُ قَلْبٌ أَوْ أَلْقَى السَّمْعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٌ ﴿٣٧﴾

In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. (37)

وَلَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ وَمَا بَيْنَهُمَا فِي سِتَّةِ أَيَّامٍ وَمَا مَسَّنَا مِن لُّغُوبٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. (38)

فَٱصۡبِرۡ عَلَىٰ مَا يَقُولُونَ وَسَبِّحۡ
بِحَمۡدِ رَبِّكَ قَبۡلَ طُلُوعِ ٱلشَّمۡسِ
وَقَبۡلَ ٱلۡغُرُوبِ ﴿٣٩﴾

Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; (39)

وَمِنَ ٱلَّيۡلِ فَسَبِّحۡهُ وَأَدۡبَٰرَ ٱلسُّجُودِ ﴿٤٠﴾

and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. (40)

وَٱسۡتَمِعۡ يَوۡمَ يُنَادِ ٱلۡمُنَادِ مِن مَّكَانٖ
قَرِيبٖ ﴿٤١﴾

And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, (41)

يَوۡمَ يَسۡمَعُونَ ٱلصَّيۡحَةَ بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ ذَٰلِكَ
يَوۡمُ ٱلۡخُرُوجِ ﴿٤٢﴾

the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. (42)

إِنَّا نَحۡنُ نُحۡيِۦ وَنُمِيتُ وَإِلَيۡنَا ٱلۡمَصِيرُ ﴿٤٣﴾

It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. (43)

يَوۡمَ تَشَقَّقُ ٱلۡأَرۡضُ عَنۡهُمۡ سِرَاعٗاۚ
ذَٰلِكَ حَشۡرٌ عَلَيۡنَا يَسِيرٞ ﴿٤٤﴾

On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. (44)

نَّحۡنُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا يَقُولُونَۖ وَمَآ أَنتَ عَلَيۡهِم بِجَبَّارٖۖ
فَذَكِّرۡ بِٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ مَن يَخَافُ وَعِيدِ ﴿٤٥﴾

We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (45)

Truth and Denial

In its initial section, comprising the first 15 verses, the *sūrah* speaks about resurrection and its denial by the unbelievers who wonder that it should even be mentioned, let alone asserted. The Qur'ān, however, not only addresses their denial of the truth of resurrection, it also aims to put their deviant minds back on the right track. It tries first to awaken their hearts, alerting them to contemplation of the great truths that are clearly manifest in the universe. It does not engage them in any intellectual argument about resurrection; instead, it tries to bring life into their hearts and minds so that they can reflect. It puts before them the truth that is clearly evident in everything around them so that they will respond. This method is especially effective and is one that should be carefully studied by advocates of the divine message.

The *sūrah* begins with an oath by the letter *Qāf* and by the glorious Qur'ān, which is composed of letters like *Qāf*. In fact, this is the first letter of the word 'Qur'ān'. The *sūrah* does not mention the subject matter of the oath, leaving it as a way to open the door to whatever the *sūrah* wants to say. Thus, the oath serves to alert us to the fact that what comes afterwards is momentous. This is indeed what is intended, as the *sūrah* immediately moves away from the oath using the conjunction *bal,* which has no English equivalent.[1] It now begins to discuss their amazement at what God's Messenger and the Qur'ān say about the dead being brought back to life: "*But the unbelievers deem it strange that a warner from among themselves should have come to them and they say: 'This is indeed most strange! When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*'" (Verses 2–3)

They think it strange that someone from among themselves should warn them when this is indeed the very thing that human nature easily accepts. It is most natural that God should have chosen one of them to deliver His message for he was someone who could readily share their feelings, speak their language, take part in their activities, be amongst them through their lives, appreciate their motives as also recognize their

1. Some translators use the word nay to render the Arabic conjunction *bal*, but this is rather unsatisfactory in most cases as nay has connotations of negation. Here we have used the term 'but', though admittedly this too is inadequate. – Editor's note.

abilities and limits. Such a person is the best one to warn them against what may happen should they persist in their erring ways, to teach them how to change course, and to outline the duties that they have to fulfil. He would be the first to discharge these duties.

They felt it strange, however, to have such a message delivered in the first place, and were particularly amazed that this Messenger should speak to them about their being raised from the dead. Resurrection is central to the Islamic faith; indeed, it is the foundation on which all requirements of Islam are based. Every Muslim is required to support the truth against falsehood and uphold goodness against evil. A Muslim needs to make everything he does in life an act of worship, by ensuring that whatever he does aims to win God's acceptance and serve His cause. All action must be rewarded, and reward might not be forthcoming during our life's journey on earth. It is thus deferred until the final reckoning is done. This means that another world is needed. Hence resurrection, so as to face the reckoning in the next world. Should this fundamental principle of a second life disappear from a person's mindset, that person cannot form a clear concept of Islam and so cannot follow it.

Those people in Makkah, however, did not look at the question in this light at all. They were too naïve to understand the true nature of life and death, or to visualize God's power. Hence they said: "*When we have died and become dust...? Such a return to life is too far-fetched.*" (Verse 3) Thus, to them, it was a question of improbability of life after death when people's bodies have decomposed and turned to dust. Yet, since life takes place in the first place, why is it improbable for it to occur again. Moreover, this miracle of life occurs before their very eyes at every moment. It is there around them throughout the universe. It is to this that the Qur'ān draws their attention in this *sūrah*.

Before we continue with what the *sūrah* says about the universe and the images of life it portrays we need to reflect a little on the fact that people perish. This is pointed out by the unbelievers as they say: "*When we have died and become dust...?*" So people die and perish. Whoever reads what those unbelievers say will look at himself and people living in his vicinity and imagine how death occurs. In fact, he will begin to feel how he will turn to nothing when he is still alive, walking on earth.

Nothing shakes a person's heart like death, and nothing fills him with dread like perishing. The *sūrah*'s comment strengthens this effect as it describes the earth eating them little by little: "*We know very well what the earth takes away from them. We have an unfailing, comprehensive record.*" (Verse 4) The phraseology of this comment shows the earth as a living thing that swallows, little by little, their buried bodies in a steady progressive action asserting that God knows what the earth swallows and that it is all recorded. Nothing is lost even though they may die and perish. As for putting life back into this dust that remains from their bodies, this is merely a repeat of what had happened before and what continues to happen in endless processes of bringing forth life anew.

We see how the *sūrah* makes successive touches to soften hearts, readying them to receive what follows before addressing the main issue.

The *sūrah* then describes the state of mind that gives rise to their flimsy objections. They have denied the truth, which made the earth under their feet move. In this way they are completely unstable: "*Yet they deny the truth when it comes to them; and so they are in a state of confusion.*" (Verse 5) This is a telling image. The truth is the solid point where a believer stands, giving him a firm step as he walks on solid ground. Everything around him that is contrary to the truth is unstable, confused and lacking substance. Whoever steps outside the truth is bound to slip into such confusion and so lose stability. He is without reassurance, ever in a state of confusion. When someone moves away from the truth, he is pulled in all directions by different desires and motives, afflicted by doubt, hesitant, moving once to the right and once to the left. He has no solid basis, no safe refuge.

As the *sūrah* prepares to discuss their objections to resurrection, it touches on further aspects of this fundamental truth as it appears in the structure of the universe. It invites them to look at the heavens, the earth, mountains, rain, palm trees, gardens and plants. The style employed here is in full harmony with the magnificence of the solid truth: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned it, leaving no flaws in it.*" (Verse 6)

The sky represents a page in the book of the universe, testifying to the truth they had abandoned. Do they not see its lofty and firm

structure, its adorned beauty and flawless freedom? Needless to say, stability, beauty and perfection are clear features common to both the sky and the truth. Hence they come in for special emphasis here, as do the facts that the sky is well built, adorned and is without holes and cracks in its structure.

Likewise, the earth is a page from the same book of the universe: "*We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it.*" (Verse 7) The wide spread of the earth, the firm mountains placed on it and the delectable plants that grow on it also project the same features of firmness, stability and beauty already associated with the sky.

Now that this universal image has been drawn, the *sūrah* touches their hearts directing them to reflect on the purpose of creation: "*so that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Thus curtains are removed, insight is sharpened and hearts and souls are alerted to reflect on the origination, wisdom and harmony apparent in the universe. Such a reminder is especially useful to those who wish to turn to God.

This link between the human heart and the inspiration of the endless, beautiful universe is indeed what gives opening the book of the universe and contemplating it the effect it has on our hearts and the value it attaches to our lives. The Qur'ān establishes this link between knowledge and the man who has it. Yet this link is precisely that which is ignored by contemporary research methods that are often called 'scientific'. This also inevitably leads to a severance of the bond between people and the world they live in. Mankind is a part of the universe, and its life can only flourish when their hearts beat to the tune of the universe. Every new piece of knowledge about a star, a planet, a special characteristic or feature of a plant or an animal, or a feature of the universe as a whole and what it contains of animate or inanimate objects should be transformed into a message to the human heart that increases man's pleasant familiarity with the world around him. Thus are the bonds of friendship between human beings and other creatures strengthened, and the sense of unity that applies to all confirmed. This, in turn, stresses the oneness of God, the Creator of the universe and all it contains. Any knowledge, research

or scientific discipline that does not lead to this objective is incomplete, false or useless.

This universe is the open book of the truth, readable in all languages and by all methods. A simple person living in a hut or a tent can browse through it as easily as can a highly educated palace dweller, each according to their abilities, and each discovering that they have access to the truth through it. The book of the universe is open at all times: "*So that it serves as a lesson and a reminder to everyone who wishes to turn to God.*" (Verse 8) Modern science, however, blocks this reminder, severs this link between the human heart and the universe. Why? Because it is controlled by people who have been blinded by the falsehood called the 'scientific method', a method that does not acknowledge a link between the universe and all the creatures living in it.

The approach based on faith does not take away anything of the results of the 'scientific method' in understanding individual facts. Indeed, it adds a link connecting these individual facts and relating them to the great truths. It is faith that establishes a bond between the human heart and the laws and facts of the universe, allowing them to play an inspiring tune to man's feelings and life. They are no longer cold facts that open up nothing of their beautiful secrets. It is the approach based on faith therefore that should direct studies and research.

The *sūrah* continues to present the pages of truth in the book of the universe, in preparation for tackling the question of resurrection: "*We send down from the skies water rich in blessings, and We produce with it gardens and fields of grain, and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, providing sustenance suitable for people. Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verses 9–11)

The water sent down from the sky is a great sign, sending life into hearts before it quickens dead land. It imparts a special feeling to all. It is not only children that rainfall delights; sensitive adults also experience a similar feeling of awe. The rain is described here as *'rich in blessings'*, and a means by which to produce fruits and fields of grain, as well as palm trees of great beauty: "*And tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates.*" The description of the fruits these trees bear is intended to highlight this beautiful aspect, emphasizing harmony with the overpowering and

beautiful truth the universe presents. A touch on human feelings is added within the context of the rain and what it brings about of plant life: "*providing sustenance suitable for people.*" It is God who gives this sustenance, from the time it sends forth its shoots until it gives its yield. He is the Master and they, the servants, remain oblivious of their duty to appreciate and show gratitude.

At this point, the final goal is identified. "*Thus We bring dead land to life. So will people come forth from the dead.*" (Verse 11) It is a continuing process, one that is familiar to them. However, they overlook it and this before they have even arrived at their objections. Yet resurrection is as simple as the shoot springing out of dead land after it has been quickened with rain. This is stated now, after a host of inspiring notes played for the human heart. Thus hearts are addressed by the Creator of hearts.

A Glance at History

The *sūrah* now opens some pages of the book of human history, speaking of the fate of past communities who argued about resurrection in the same way as did the Arab unbelievers, and who similarly denied God's messages. As a result, they incurred God's inevitable punishment:

> *Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, 'Ād, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubba': they all disbelieved God's messengers, and therefore My warnings came true. Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.* (Verses 12–15)

Al-Rass signifies a well over which there is no built wall, and the dales signifies an area thick with trees. The people of the wooded dales most probably refer to Shu'ayb's people. We have no information about the people of al-Rass other than this reference here and a similar one in *Sūrah al-Furqān*, (25: 38) The same applies to the people of Tubba', a title used by the Yemeni kings of the Ḥimyar dynasty. The other peoples mentioned in this short passage are known to anyone who reads the Qur'ān.

The purpose of this quick reference to these peoples is certainly not to give any detailed information about them. It is only a reminder of the fate of earlier disbelieving communities. What is worth noting is that the verse mentions that each denied 'God's messengers', in the plural. This emphasizes the unity of the divine message as all messengers preached the same faith. Thus, whoever denies anyone of God's messengers actually denies them all, because he rejects the same message delivered by them all. Gods' messengers are brothers forming one community. They are like a tree with roots stretching far back into time. Each branch of that tree projects all its essential qualities, giving an image of the whole. Therefore, whoever cuts a branch actually cuts the tree and all its branches. Therefore, God's warnings came true and those communities suffered the fates known to listeners.

Having stated the fates of all these communities, the *sūrah* again picks up the question of resurrection, asking: "*Were We worn out by the first creation? Yet they are still in doubt about a second creation.*" (Verse 15) The first creation is there before their eyes; therefore, the question needs no answer. However, because they do not look at the evidence presented by this first creation, they are in doubt about the second. What can be said about one who denies the truth when such irrefutable evidence is placed before his very own eyes?

A Journey Through Life

The second part of the *sūrah* continues with the theme of resurrection. It seeks to treat those hearts that deny resurrection from a new angle, but makes some frightening statements. It speaks about the accurate monitoring to which reference has been made in the Prologue. It presents clear images of this monitoring, followed by images of man in the throes of death, then we see the opening of records and the reckoning before we are shown hell opening to receive those destined for it. Whenever a new group of them are thrown into it, it asks whether it can have some more. This is contrasted by the scene of heaven and the honour and favours bestowed on its dwellers.

It is a single journey that begins with birth, goes through death and ends with resurrection and deed reckoning. It is a continuous, uninterrupted

journey, charting the only way we must travel. Throughout the journey we are in God's hands and under His careful watch. We cannot escape. When we realize this, our hearts are filled with awe and apprehension. How else should we feel realizing that we are in the hands of the Almighty who knows our innermost thoughts and who overlooks nothing?

When any of us thinks that the authorities, with all their intelligence and reporters, are after us, following our footsteps, we are perturbed and agitated. We lose our patience and our balance. No matter how widespread and far-reaching the intelligence apparatus is, any of us, however, can escape its attention once we close our door or our mouths. By contrast, God's watchful eye is with us wherever we may be. He monitors what is in our minds and knows all our secrets. What then should we feel, when we realize that we are under such watch, subject to the Almighty's power?

Every Little Secret

> *It is We who have created man, and We know what his soul whispers to him. We are closer to him than his jugular vein; with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.* (Verses 16–18)

The first clause in these verses, '*it is We who have created man*', indicates its message. A person who makes a machine is the one who best knows how it is put together and how it functions. Its maker did not create it, because he is not the one who originated the material used in its making; he is only the one who designed and manufactured it. How does this compare with the Creator who originates all things? Man is made by God's hand, and God knows every little detail about him. Hence He says: "*We know what his soul whispers to him.*" (Verse 16) Thus man realizes that his inner thoughts are laid open. Nothing is hidden. Even the whispers of his soul, secret as these may be, are known to God, in preparation for the Day of Reckoning, which people often deny.

"*We are closer to him than his jugular vein.*" (Verse 16) Closer than the vein that transports his blood! This expression clearly describes the

hand in control and the direct watch. When man imagines this fact, he is bound to experience a shiver down his spine. If man really understood the import of this statement, he would not dare say a single word that does not please God. He would not even allow a fleeting thought that is contrary to what is acceptable to God. This statement is sufficient to make man careful, always alert.

The *sūrah* makes the control even stricter, showing man throughout his life as being under the ever-present watch of two angels, on his right and left, who record every move he makes, every word he says and every thought he entertains: "*with two receptors set to record, one on his right and one on his left, every word he utters [is noted down by] an ever-present watcher.*" (Verses 17–18) We do not know how these two angels record what they monitor. We need not in any case indulge in conjecture. Our attitude towards information that relates to the world beyond our perception is to accept it as it stands, believing in its import without seeking to know more. Such knowledge, were we to gain it, would not be of any use to us. In fact, it remains outside human experience.

In our own world, we have come to know some means of recording that could have never been thought possible by our forefathers. Magnetic and video tapes record movement and voice and reproduce them for radio, cinema and television.[2] All this happens within our own human environment. Hence, there is no need to try to assign to the angels a method of recording based on our own human experience, which may be totally irrelevant to their realm of which we know only what God has told us.

It is enough that we should appreciate this fact, expressed here in a vivid picture, and feel when we are about to make any movement or utter a word that, to our right and left, there are two watchguards taking note of whatever we do or say, entering it in our record which will be presented to God who overlooks nothing. This is a fact, even though we may not understand how it is done. There is no doubt that it takes place, in some form. God has told us about it so that we take it

2. The author wrote this in the late 1950s, when CDs and DVDs were still beyond people's imagination. – Editor's note.

into account, but also so we do not waste time and effort in trying to determine how it is done.

Such was the method adopted by people who benefited by the Qur'ān and by the Prophet's directives concerning the facts it speaks of. They took to heart what it said and acted on its basis. In a *ḥadīth* reported by 'Alqamah on the authority of Bilāl ibn al-Ḥārith, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "A man may say a word that is pleasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will credit him with His pleasure for it until the Day when he meets Him. Another man may say a word that is displeasing to God, without a thought of how far it can reach. God will record against him His displeasure for it until the Day when he meets Him." 'Alqamah commented: "Many are the words I refrained from saying on account of this hadith." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.] It is reported that when Imām Aḥmad was in the throes of death, he moaned in pain. It was said to him that even moans are recorded. He then stopped moaning until he died. In this way, such people practically lived the facts the Qur'ān tells us about.

As Life Draws to an End

That was the page of life, which is followed in man's book by the page of approaching death: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth: This is what you tried to escape.*" (Verse 19) There is nothing man tries to escape more than death. He even tries to banish the thought of death from his mind. Yet how can he do so when death is a seeker that never stops. It continues its steady march, and never misses its appointed time. The mere mention of '*the stupor of death*' sends a shiver into brave hearts. Yet as the scene is shown, it is said to him: "*This is what you tried to escape.*" The mere sound makes him shudder when he is still full of life. How about if it is said when he is in the throes of death? It is authentically reported that when death was approaching the Prophet, he wiped sweat off his face and said: "All glory be to God! Death has its stupor!" [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] He said this, even though he had chosen to be in God's company, longing to see Him. So how about ordinary mortals?

It is noteworthy that truth itself is mentioned here: "*The stupor of death brings with it the full truth.*" (Verse 19) This suggests that a human being sees the whole truth as he is about to die. The truth appears to him fully exposed. He sees what he did not know, and what he used to deny. It is, now too late for anything that may benefit him. It is too late for repentance, belief or the mending of ways. The unbelievers denied this very truth and their denial caused them confusion. Now that they realize all this, it is too late for them to do anything about it.

The *sūrah* now speaks about the shock of resurrection and the fearsome reckoning:

> *The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness. 'Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.' And his companion will say: 'Here is what I have recorded.' 'Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.' His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.' God will say: 'Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.'* (Verses 20–29)

It is sufficient to put this scene before our eyes, for thereafter we will spend the rest of our lives in awe and anticipation. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "'How can I feel happy when I know that the one assigned to blow the Trumpet has lifted it to his mouth, lowering his forehead and awaiting permission.' The people listening asked him: 'What should we say, Messenger of God?' He replied: 'Say: We seek none other than God; He is the best protector.' They all said it." [Related by al-Tirmidhī.]

"*Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness.*" (Verse 21) It is the soul, every single one, that is held to account, and it is the one who receives the outcome. It comes with two assigned to it: one driving it on and the other to bear witness. These may be the ones who recorded everything a person does throughout life, which is more probable, but they may also be different entities. The

scene is akin to that of taking someone to trial, but this trial is before the Almighty.

In this extremely difficult situation, the person is told: "*Of this you have been unmindful, but We have lifted your veil and sharp is your sight today.*" (Verse 22) There is nothing to blur your eyesight now. You can see clearly. This is the appointed time you ignored, the position you have not reckoned with, the end you did not expect. You can look all around you for your sight is now sharp indeed. At this point, his companion, which is most probably a reference to the witness who recorded all his actions, comes forward and says: "*Here is what I have recorded.*" (Verse 23)

The *sūrah* says nothing about examining the record. Instead, it states the divine verdict as it is given to the two angels: the one leading the person and the witness. They are told: "*Cast into hell every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, was a sinful aggressor, fomenter of doubt, who set up another deity alongside God. Cast him into severe suffering.*" (Verses 24–26) These descriptions make the situation even more critical, for they show that the Almighty is displeased. They are all negative descriptions that deserve increased punishment. They are followed by His repeating the order, which needs no emphasis anyway: "*Cast him into severe suffering,*" indicating the unbeliever's position in hell.

This scares his companion who, thinking that his long association with the condemned person may reflect on him, hastens to dissociate himself from his doings: "*His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress. He had already gone far astray.'*" (Verse 27) The reference here may be to a different companion who submitted the records. This may be the devil who, throughout his life, tried to tempt him away from the truth. Now he tries to shirk his responsibility, asserting that the man was already far astray and, as such, accepted the tempting offer to go even further astray. There are other instances in the Qur'ān that tell us that the evil companion disowns the human one. Yet the first possibility we mentioned is also probable. The companion referred to in this verse could be the same angel who kept the record, but the hardship of the situation on the Day of Judgement makes him hasten to state his own

innocence even when he is truly innocent. He simply wants to prove that despite his long association with this miserable creature, he had no influence on his deeds. When an innocent person hastens to prove his truth-telling, this reveals much about the difficulty of the situation.

A final order is now issued to stop all argument: "*God will say: Do not argue in My presence, for I had forewarned you. My word will not be altered; but never do I do the least wrong to My creatures.*" (Verses 28–29) The occasion is not one for contention. Warnings were issued earlier, stating the nature of requital for every action. Everything has been recorded, and it is on the basis of this record that requital and reward are determined. No one is unjustly dealt with, for the one who looks into people's cases and determines their fate is the faultless arbiter.

Thus the fearsome scene of reckoning, with all its hardship, is thus ended, but the overall scene continues, with the *sūrah* revealing a more fearful aspect of it: "*On that day We will ask hell, 'Are you full?' and it will reply, 'Are there no more?'*" (Verse 30) The whole scene is one of dialogue. Therefore, hell is portrayed here in the same way, with a question put to it and an answer given. This reveals something that is both amazing and awesome. We see every hardened unbeliever, everyone who hindered good, who was a sinful aggressor, a fomenter of doubt being thrown into hell where they pile up in great numbers. Then hell is asked whether it has had its full. Its reply is that of an unsatiated glutton: "*Are there no more?*" How frightening!

A contrasting image is drawn on the other side: it is pleasant, calm and friendly. Heaven is shown drawing near to the righteous such that they can see it for themselves. An honourable welcome awaits them:

> *And paradise will be brought close to the righteous and will no longer be distant: 'This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion. Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.' There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.* (Verses 31–35)

Honour is shown with every word and move. Paradise is brought near so that they do not trouble themselves about going to it. The bliss of being accepted by God is extended to them there: "*This is what you have been promised; this is for everyone who used to turn to God and to keep Him in mind, who used to stand in awe of the Lord of Grace although He is beyond the reach of human perception, and who comes before Him with a heart full of devotion.*" It is those who are on high that state their qualities. Thus they realize that this is how they appear in God's records. Then they are admitted to heaven, in peace, a place from which they will not be turned out: "*Enter paradise in peace; this is the day when everlasting life begins.*" An announcement is made on high, noting their position and making it clear that their share with God is unlimited: "*There they shall have all that they desire, and We have even more for them.*" Whatever they may wish for will remain less than what is prepared for them. Since '*more*' is given by their Lord, it must be limitless.

An Easy Resurrection

The final part of the *sūrah* sounds like the final beat of a tune, as it repeats its strongest notes to an even faster time. It includes a glimpse of history and the fate of earlier unbelievers, an image from the open book of the universe and a new scene from the Day of Judgement, all coupled with a serious and inspiring directive:

> *How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? They wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge. In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees. We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us. Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer. And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is*

We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us. We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning. (Verses 36–45)

Although all these points have come under discussion earlier in the *sūrah*, they are repeated in conclusion with a new rhythm and added effect. They are noted here with more emphasis and greater speed. Thus they carry here a different effect from that produced by their more detailed discussion earlier. This is characteristic of the Qur'ānic style.

The *sūrah* stated earlier: "*Long before these unbelievers Noah's people also disbelieved, as did the people of al-Rass, Thamūd, ʿĀd, Pharaoh, Lot's brethren, the dwellers of the wooded dales and the people of Tubbaʿ: They all disbelieved their messengers, and therefore My warnings came true.*" (Verses 12–14) Here at the end the *sūrah* says: "*How many a generation, far greater in power, have We destroyed before these [unbelievers]? they wandered through the lands seeking a place of refuge.*" (Verse 36) It is a reference to the same fact, but in its new image it looks different. Then the *sūrah* adds the turn of time as generations followed generations, wandering through the lands. However, they remain within God's grasp from which no one can escape. A further comment is added to give it a more serious effect: "*In this there is a reminder for everyone who has an alert heart, or one who attentively listens and sees.*" (Verse 37)

There is indeed a reminder in the fate suffered by earlier communities for anyone with a heart to consider. A person who is not reminded by this is one whose heart is dead, or who has always been without a feeling heart. Indeed, in order to have due admonition, it is sufficient that a person should listen attentively. The story will undoubtedly have its telling effect. This is certain, because the human soul is very sensitive to the fate suffered by earlier peoples. Even the slightest degree of sensitivity is enough to bring back memories and inspiring images of such situations.

Earlier, the *sūrah* opened pages from the book of the universe, stating: "*Do they not look at the sky above them: how We have built it and adorned*

it, leaving no flaws in it. We spread out the earth and set upon it firm mountains, and caused every kind of delectable plants to grow on it." (Verses 6–7) Now at the end of the *sūrah*, it says: "*We have indeed created the heavens and the earth and all that is in between in six days. No weariness could ever touch Us.*" (Verse 38) Thus it adds here a further touch, making it clear that the creation of everything in the universe, including the heavens and the earth, presented no difficulty for God. Compared with this, bringing the dead back to life is only a small matter.

A comment is then added, providing further shades and inspiration: "*Bear, then, with patience whatever they may say, and extol your Lord's limitless glory before the rising of the sun and before its setting; and in the night, too, extol His glory, and at the end of every prayer.*" (Verses 39–40) The rising and setting of the sun, and the spreading of the night after sunset, are all phenomena closely interlinked with the heavens and the earth. The *sūrah* delineates the bond between them, the glorification and praising of God and the prostrating of ourselves before Him. Within the same context, the *sūrah* also gives the instruction to bear patiently with whatever the unbelievers deny about resurrection and their refusal to believe in God's ability to bring creatures back to life. Thus a new aura of God's glorification, worship and patience is given to the same points repeated here. As this is all linked to aspects of the universe, these feelings are enhanced within a believer's heart whenever he looks at the skies or the earth, at every sunrise and approach of night, and whenever he prostrates himself before God.

A further touch is added to this portrait of the universe. The Prophet is instructed to have patience and to perform all this glorification and worship while remaining on the alert, expecting the great event that may come at any moment of the night or day. Only those who are totally oblivious of the truth will pay no attention to it. It is the event that provides the central theme of the *sūrah*: "*And listen out for the day when the caller will call from a nearby place, the day when they will in truth hear the mighty blast; that is the day when they will come out [of their graves]. It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return. On the day when the earth will be rent asunder all around them, letting them rush out. That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verses 41–44)

What we have here is a new scene depicting that most difficult day. When the first reference to it is made in the *sūrah*, it is shown differently: "*The trumpet will be blown: 'This is the day [you were] warned of.' Every soul will come attended by one who will drive it on and another to bear witness...*" (Verses 20–21) Here the blowing of the trumpet is referred to as a '*mighty blast*'. It gives us a picture of how they will rush out as the earth is rent asunder all around them. This includes all those countless creatures of all generations, arising from graves they may have been buried in for a very long time. They are all ripped open, bringing up what remains of bones, dust, and lost cells in the earth. None except God knows their whereabouts. This, then, is an amazing image, one that the human mind can barely imagine.

Having drawn this bustling and inspirational scene, the *sūrah* states the truth which they deny and argue about: "*It is We who grant life and deal death; and to Us all shall return.*" (Verse 43) "*That gathering will be easy for Us.*" (Verse 44) This is the most suitable time to state this truth.

The *sūrah* finally reassures the Prophet so that he is not troubled by the unbelievers' denials of this truth and the arguments they make in disputing it: "*We are fully aware of what they say. You are not one to use coercion with them. Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45)

It is sufficient for you to reassure yourselves that "*We are fully aware of what they say.*" This is indeed an implicit warning of the consequences of this knowledge, which are bound to be terrible for them. "*You are not one to use coercion with them.*" You cannot force them to believe in God. You have no power over them. That power belongs to God alone. "*Therefore, remind, with the Qur'ān, those who fear My warning.*" (Verse 45) The Qur'ān shakes people's hearts. No heart that is alert and sensitive will ever reject the truths presented in the Qur'ān in its unique, remarkable style.

When a *sūrah* like this is presented, the matter does not require any mighty being to force people into submission to faith. The Qur'ān has far greater power than all tyrants could possess. A *sūrah* like this can easily produce on people's hearts an effect far more powerful than their whips. Whatever God says is the absolute truth.